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Be sure to experience for yourself the work associated with the study guide of the same title. If you are writing a paper on The Long Afternoon's "Signifying Nothing," listen to "Signifying Nothing." No matter how detailed the notes are, they are no substitute for the actual text.

Introduction and Overview

The Long Afternoon's "Signifying Nothing," the group's second album, came two full years after the release of their first album, "The Luxury Problem."

"Signifying Nothing" comprises 16 chapters divided into two "sides," an anachronistic reference to the days of vinyl albums and audiotape cassettes. This imaginary division also serves as a subtle indication of a primary theme of this work: the distortion of meaning that time frequently inflicts on events.

The work's title references a line in "Macbeth" by William Shakespeare, but the band—as it frequently does—is also playing with multiple entendres. As we shall see, the titular chapter makes the Shakespeare reference quite literal. But as a title, "Signifying Nothing" also poses a slyly self-mocking question: "It's just a record...how seriously should you take these little songs about life and death?"

On another level, some scholars theorize the title answered critics who considered it foolish to make records when prospects for broad commercial success were virtually nonexistent. If that's your measure of what's worthwhile, the title says, then this work *won't* signify anything to you, and you might as well buy something from The Used instead.

Scholars in this camp point out that The Long Afternoon's goals never encompassed concepts like sustaining a career, or even making fans. But others counter that the band was never deliberately confrontational or anti-entertainment, and that the title may, in all honesty, truly signify nothing.

Nonetheless, in "Signifying Nothing," the group crafted a work that exceeded the relatively limited expectations typically associated with projects of such humble origins and circumstances.

Signifying Nothing, Chapter by Chapter

1. Elinor Murphy.

A cautionary tale of media oversaturation as experienced by one of many animas The Long Afternoon has written of over the years.

2. Building.

On October 21, 1967, patriots attempted to exorcize the Pentagon. The plan was to sing and chant until it levitated and turned orange, driving out the evil spirits. The effort failed. However, The Long Afternoon seems to say, those brave souls had no Theremins, so perhaps it's time to try again.

3. Goodbye to All That.

Separation breeds speculation, but with no chance of reconnection why return to the scene of the crime? Because your mind labors to assign meaning even when there isn't any. And because William S. Burroughs also made films, one of which is referenced in this chapter, leading to many misinterpretations of the final verse.

4. Using Dream.

You never recapture the illusory magic of the first stone, and you cannot stay as close to your friends as it seemed when you were kids. Both inexorably slip away. You can revisit them in your dreams, but will you really want to? What would Lindsey Buckingham do? He'd play fingerstyle, like The Long Afternoon did here.

5. Never Tell.

The last time she was seen, the veneer of beauty she once exuded had been made transparent by off-label use of various solvents. Ill omens saturated the atmosphere all around her. The bathroom hadn't been cleaned in months. That Gun Club record she borrowed was left on the turntable, scratched beyond playability.

6. She Fell.

On the one hand, indisputable tragedy. On the other, remarkable entertainment, akin to the freak shows attended by generations before The Long Afternoon's. Not coincidentally, like those freak shows, watching starlets crash and burn was alluringly distracting from things you might actually influence. The gaping maw of the news cycle must be fed.

7. Signifying Nothing.

For whose sins, exactly, did that kid who lived down the street when you were growing up die? Ask Pat Tillman. He may know. Abstract ideals don't inject meaning into the shell of an otherwise useless death grounded in deceit. And they bring little comfort after the ceremony ends and you go home alone.

8. Shift.

The Long Afternoon never learned to handle a manual transmission, among many other things. That failure, a couple of half-read novels, and a play on words yielded a fractured girl-and-her-car episode with overt Cars flourishes and more double entendres.

9. Sermon.

In which the narrator confides to more commercially-minded compatriots precisely why the experiment must be terminated.

10. That's Just the Way It Happened.

R. D. Laing noted you can't have another person's experience. But we can experience other people experiencing us. If you're lucky, you get to meet someone who likes experiencing you as much as you like experiencing them. Positive though hardly literal associations with opiates and hard rock infuse the individual experience related herein.

11. Yr Happy Girl.

The younger sister was a real go-getter. Fine grades. Class vice-president, co-chair of the chess club. Understudy in the senior play. The smiling face of a proud family. A perfect ray of sunshine to everyone except herself.

12. Intent.

In which all the surveillance cameras money can buy fail to discern the germ of an idea that, one day, will blossom into glory or tragedy, depending on who gets to write the tale.

13. Blacklight District.

What rapidly became a developmental cul-de-sac first seemed like an express ticket to a happier time. From outside it's easy to see the points of extrication. But from inside, you're too fascinated by the reverberations created by the gears grinding to a halt to notice those points flashing by.

14. Spencer Patrol.

You're allowed to start the day again whenever you want. When you do, things that seemed simplistic may resonate in ways you would never predict, acquiring strange new dimensions of gravity and poignancy.

15. How Did I Get So Far From Where I Should Have Been.

Disappointed looks on the faces of parents and peers mean little when paths they prescribe lead only to the places you never want to see again.

16. Bother.

Speaking objectively, or even statistically, most things we do probably don't matter. In 100 years, possibly less, the results of today's to-do list probably will signify nothing. But that doesn't let you or me off the hook, my friend. Is there some other chance you expect to get?

Artwork of Signifying Nothing

Four paintings appear on the physical edition of "Signifying Nothing." All are in the public domain, and all presumably reflect themes explored in the work.

The album's front cover is a detail of "Conscience: Judas" by Russian artist Nikolai Ge. It is one of several religious paintings by Ge criticized or banned as being blasphemous.

Two paintings by Hieronymus Bosch grace the back of the CD case and the inside panels of the booklet. The back cover features a detail of "The Garden of Earthly Delights," and its depiction of groups gathered together to enjoy various pleasures stands in sharp contrast to the isolation suggested by the Ge painting.

The booklet spread is a detail of Bosch's "Temptation of St. Anthony," and serves to emphasize the album's repeated theme that being in the same place at the same time is no guarantee of shared interpretation. Indeed, individuals in the Bosch painting seem largely unaware of each other; the travails of one group seem to signify nothing to the others.

The back of the booklet features a detail of "The Fight Between Carnival and Lent," painted by Pieter Brueghel the Elder in 1559. The art, which depicts simultaneous celebrations both sacred and profane, again reinforces the idea of people being spiritually and intellectually separated from each other even when they gather in groups, even when they share the same space.

But given the group's penchant for leaving multiple interpretations open, they also may just be nice pictures, chosen at random, signifying nothing.

That's up to you.